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# THE SETUPATIS, THE DUTCH, AND OTHER BANDITS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RAMNAD (SOUTH INDIA)

BY

LENNART BES\*

## *Abstract*

In Ramnad, bandits could be king. The open-ended political culture of this South Indian kingdom presented even people on the margins of society with opportunities to attain political power. Likewise, the VOC (Dutch East India Company), operating from the coastal frontier of the kingdom, played a significant role in the political arena of Ramnad. Given this similarity, it may be asked whether the Dutch were regarded as neutral outsiders (as they themselves thought they were) or rather as an indigenous marginal power. By comparing the internal and regional relations of Ramnad with its contacts with the VOC, this article attempts to determine the kingdom's perception of the Company. In Ramnad, could the Dutch be bandits?

En Ramnad, un royaume dans l'Inde méridional, il arrive que le bandit se fait roi. La culture politique, ainsi que les avenues du pouvoir y furent en principe ouvertes à tous; aux marginaux indigènes, vivants dans les terres sèches périphériques, autant qu'aux fonctionnaires de la compagnie néerlandaise des Indes Orientales, la VOC, qui avait un comptoir sur le littoral. Elle se considérait neutre. Toutefois elle allait jouer un rôle important dans l'arène politique de Ramnad. Or, au niveau conceptuel la question se pose si la perspective indigène différenciait entre le roturier indigène d'au-delà de la terre de grande culture, et l'aventurier étranger, ou par contre les confondait l'un l'autre. Cet article se propose d'y voir plus clair par l'étude des liens internes et régionaux entretenus par le centre politique de Ramnad, en comparant ceux-ci avec les relations vis-à-vis la VOC pour en déduire le statut social des Hollandais dans la société indigène.

**Keywords:** Ramnad, VOC, Dutch, South India, perceptions

Because the mother of the Theuver [Tevar, i.e. Setupati] has said to the Nataars that whatever they would steal and loot, would be their booty, they have taken this, and stand surely for the success.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai (henceforth TNA), Dutch Records (henceforth DR) 334, f. 305: secret letter received at the Dutch factory at Tuticorin (on the Madurai coast in South India) from the envoy Johan de Croes at the Ramnad court, 1744. The term "Nataars" is probably a rendering of the name Nattar or Nattan, referring to a certain South Indian community; see Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), vol. 5, 249. The Dutch, however, used this term to refer to all Hindu peasants

Around June 1731, *Resident* Reynier Helmondt died at the port of Kilakkrai in South India.<sup>2</sup> He had spent more than a decade serving the VOC (Dutch East India Company) at this lonely factory on the coast of the Ramnad kingdom, far away from his superiors at Tuticorin and Colombo. To the Company's shock and horror, the financial accounts at the Kilakkrai factory examined after Helmondt's death revealed that he had been involved in illegitimate business with indigenous traders and courtiers, including the ruler of Ramnad—called the Setupati—himself. For years the *Resident* had sold the VOC's merchandise below the fixed price, granted loans from the Company's funds, and presented his seniors with imaginary profits. The Dutch were appalled by what they called (but could hardly have been) an unprecedented scandal: the correspondence between the various echelons above Kilakkrai resounded with accusations of corruption and demands that this were never to happen again! As a new precaution, the money-box at the factory would henceforth be secured with two locks and the keys confided to different officials.<sup>3</sup> The nobles and merchants in Ramnad, however, would probably have been amazed by the VOC's extreme dismay had they known about it. Helmondt's conduct appeared to be in perfect harmony with their own behaviour. Anybody who was to secure and maintain some power in Ramnad's ever-changing political set-up had to do so by whatever means were available, even if this meant rebelling against and stealing from one's overlord. This was not perceived as corruption—a concept unlikely to have been understood in Ramnad—but rather as a legitimate and admirable strategy, to be expected in the context of the highly dynamic politics of the kingdom. After all, even the Setupati's mother sanctioned plundering in what appeared to be state territory.

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in Ramnad; see *Algemeen Rijksarchief* (henceforth ARA), archives of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (henceforth VOC) 3348, f. 573: letter from Tuticorin to the Dutch Governor Falck at Colombo (Ceylon; modern-day Sri Lanka), 1772.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based chiefly on my MA thesis, entitled "Friendship as long as the sun and moon shine. Ramnad and its perception of the Dutch East India Company, 1725-1750", which was submitted to Leiden University in 1997 and contains much information that cannot be included here. For more information, please contact "lennart.bes@ara.archief.nl". The present article has greatly benefited from discussions with Jos Gommans. Besides, I would like to thank Herman Tieken, Paul van Dyke, Gijs Kruitzer, Pieter Koenders, Sebastiaan Derkx, Mark de Lannoy, Lizette de Koning, Rosemary Robson, Norman Yoffee, and the three anonymous reviewers of the JESHO for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and Vasco Ogier for assisting at the compilation of the map.

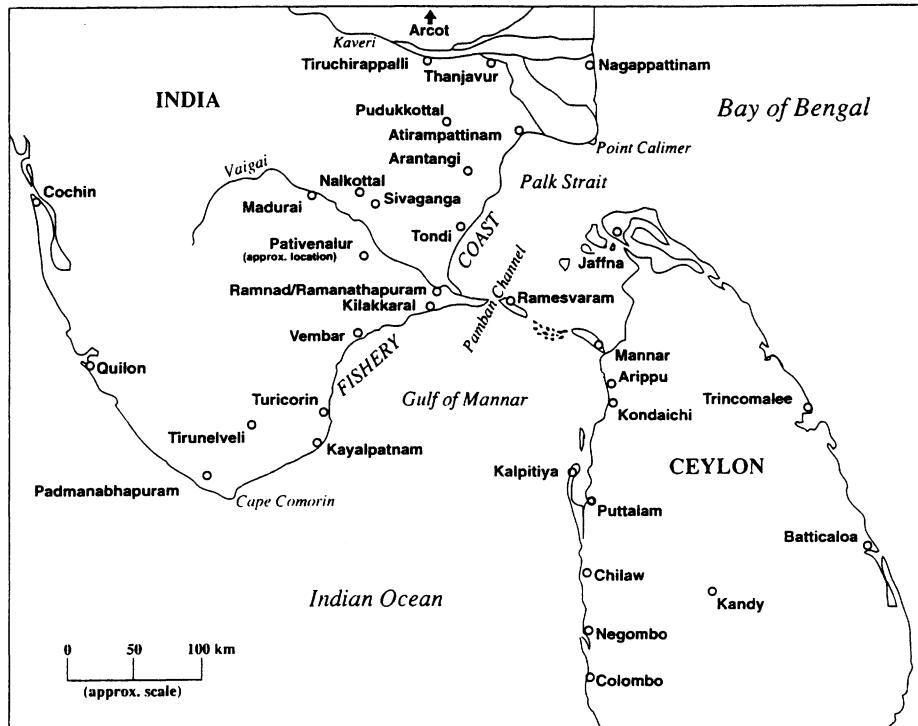
<sup>3</sup> For the Helmondt scandal, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2184, ff. 267v-70; VOC 2185, ff. 1192v-5v; VOC 2186, ff. 1308v-10v; VOC 2246, f. 134: correspondence between the factories at (in hierarchical order) Kilakkrai, Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia (the VOC headquarters in Asia; present-day Jakarta), 1731-2.

This article seeks to explore Ramnad's political culture and its bearing on the kingdom's perception of the VOC. How was political power acquired, and to which extent did this apply to the Dutch? Was the VOC considered to be more or less on a par with the other, indigenous contestants for influence in Ramnad, or did the Company occupy an exceptional, fundamentally different position because of its non-Indian background? It will be argued that Ramnad's geographical and ecological characteristics played a significant part in moulding its political culture and, as a consequence, the kingdom's view of the Dutch. With its geomorphological co-existence of semi-dry, cultivated, and coastal areas—and the respective social structures such physical diversity supported—Ramnad was a mixed, open-ended society where power was shared among many competing parties. It appears that the VOC was not felt to be distinct from these groups, but actually regarded as similar to the more marginal ones among them and, accordingly, treated as such.

In other words, an attempt has been made here to incorporate the Dutch presence into the historiography of Ramnad. This has been done on the basis of VOC records and secondary literature. The concepts employed in this essay to characterise and discuss the political culture of the kingdom and the role of the Dutch in it are taken from secondary works, which, in turn, are founded largely on (South) Indian primary sources. The Company records provide the data with which the applicability of these concepts to the case of Ramnad and the Dutch is illustrated. It may seem odd to use the sources of "foreigners" to determine an indigenous perception of precisely those foreigners, but this can be justified on rather mundane grounds. First, the VOC documents contain a wealth of unique and hitherto virtually unused information on the kingdom, often recorded at first hand. These records are by far the main European source for the history of eighteenth-century Ramnad. Second, the availability of indigenous material seems comparatively limited.<sup>4</sup> A small part has been translated and published, but most of it is only indirectly accessible by way of secondary literature. Therefore, by combining events noted by the Dutch with the socio-political structure that can be constructed from published works, this study hopes to gain a pretty optimal picture of the kingdom's view of the VOC, albeit admittedly a somewhat tentative one. It should be stressed that this article is exploratory in nature, both in the sense that it draws on a limited set of sources and reaches conclusions

<sup>4</sup> For (incomplete) overviews of the sources for the history of Ramnad, see e.g. K. Seshadri, "The Setupatis of Ramnad" (unpublished dissertation, Madura College, University of Madurai, 1976), 1-4; S. Kadhirvel, *A History of the Maravas 1700-1802* (Madurai: Madurai Publishing House, 1977), 1-5.

that pertain to eighteenth-century Ramnad and the Dutch only. This essay does not claim that its findings have any validity beyond this. As yet, general and comparative studies concerning the status of Europeans in early-modern South India await further research into more sources, regions, actors and periods.



*Map: Ramnad and neighbouring regions, 18th century*

## ROBBERS AND RULERS

As already stated, the political and social structure of Ramnad (or Ramanathapuram, which term will be used here to denote the capital) was partly the outcome of its physical landscape.<sup>5</sup> The kingdom was largely situated in the wilderness: forests and semi-arid plains preponderated over towns and villages; low rainfall and poor soil precluded large-scale agriculture. As such, it bore resemblance to the *palai*, a socio-ecological concept in ancient Tamil Sangam poetry that referred to wasteland. In this poetry, the dry, inhospitable palai functioned as a stage where heroes and villains experienced such disrupting events as highway banditry, the desolation of the country, and separation from their loved ones.<sup>6</sup> In the early-modern period, life in Ramnad was still rather epic, as robbery, plundering, and destruction were commonplace. A leading role in these destabilising activities was played by the Maravas, one of the most numerous and powerful *jatis* ("caste," endogamous, commensal, corporate group) in the kingdom. Maravas, who all bore the title of "Tivar" (god), were traditionally identified with the palai and associated with physical strength, martial skills, and bloodthirstiness. The jati was often involved in professions related to violence and protection. Consequently, in some instances the Maravas were bandits (or were at least perceived as such), but they also served as soldiers, watchmen, or village chiefs, and even rose to royal heights, as in the case of the Setupatis of Ramnad.

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<sup>5</sup> For general information about Ramnad, its history, and the Maravas, see e.g. J.H. Nelson, *The Madura Country. A Manual* (New Delhi/Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1994), pts. 1 (ch. 1, 3), 2 (ch. 2), 3 (ch. 5-11); Robert Sewell, *List of Inscriptions, and Sketch of the Dynasties of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1884), 227-32; T. Raja Ram Rao, *Ramnad Manual* (Madras, c. 1892); Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 5, 22-48; R. Sathyanaatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madura* (New Delhi/Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1991); S. Thiruvenkatachari, *The Setupatis of Ramnad* (Karaikudi-3: Department of Extension Services, Dr. Alagappa Chettiar Training College, 1959); T.V. Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts. Summaries of the Historical Manuscripts in the Mackenzie Collection*, vol. 1 (Madras: University of Madras, 1972), xxxiv-v, 58-60, 133, 163-4, 180, 200-3, 225-6, 229-30, 235-44; K. Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu* (Madras: University of Madras, 1974); Seshadri, "The Setupatis of Ramnad"; S. Kadhirvel, *A History of the Maravas*; Pamela G. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For Ramnad's ecology, see also e.g. O.H.K. Spate, *India and Pakistan. A General and Regional Geography* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd/New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1957), 728, 733-6.

<sup>6</sup> For Sangam poetry, see e.g. P.T. Srinivas Iyengar, *History of the Tamils. From the Earliest Times to 600 A.D.* (Madras: Coomaraswamy Naidu, 1929), ch. 1, 5, 13, 17; A.K. Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape. Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1967), *passim*, especially 97-115.

At first sight, the bandit and the king seem to be the poles each at one end of this range of professions, but on closer inspection, their occupations prove to be more than just opposites. Obviously, they did oppose each other: it was the king's duty to protect the order in his kingdom against the disorder caused by the bandit, but they also shared an identity. Both were warriors, using power and relying on force; both were associated with (or claimed) royalty as well as divinity. Lastly, their relationship had a complementary aspect. The king could install the bandit as a watchman against other bandits, as a soldier, as a local chief (all traditional Marava professions), or as a collector of tribute and taxes. This way, the king attempted to incorporate the bandit into his realm, thereby controlling him. The king now actually employed his opponent's qualities for his own benefit, but there was always the risk that the new, legitimised servant would become too powerful, turn into a rival, and even aspire to kingship himself. The complementary relationship between the king and the bandit also existed at a more subtle level. The former, so closely identified with the society he ruled and therefore limited in his actions, longed to be free of his responsibilities and for renunciation and the severance of all ties with his society. This ideal comes close to the marginal, disorderly world of the bandit. In sum, the king and the bandit were exponents of the classical Indian tension and interaction between centre and periphery, purity and impurity, society and renunciation.<sup>7</sup>

Like the characters in Sangam poetry, the king and the bandit each dwelt in different socio-ecological zones. While the former resided in a predominantly settled, cultivated environment, characterised by relatively stable political institutions and hierarchical relations, the latter lived mostly on semi-dry plains or in thick forests leading a nomadic and rather ephemeral, egalitarian existence. Like the archetypal king and bandit, these zones were in complementary opposition to each other. To bandits and other inhabitants of the jungles, the sedentary-agrarian regions could (by plundering or otherwise) yield farming products, livestock, and other valuables, and provide employment. To the king and his subjects, on the other hand, the semi-arid jungles—although to be feared—might serve as areas for recruitment, reclamation, foreign products, refuge, and passage to other settled regions. The two socio-ecological zones were connected by a broad, dynamic, transitional area of land, often referred to as a “frontier,” or also an “inner frontier,” as it did not demarcate kingdoms but rather differ-

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<sup>7</sup> David Shulman, “On South Indian Bandits and Kings,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 17.3 (1980): passim, especially 301-4. See also Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), ch. 7.

ent regions within them. At this frontier, the worlds of the king and the bandit exchanged ideas, goods, and people, thereby influencing one another. Naturally, this interaction between the zones was characterised by tension and violence. Both sides were keen to cross the frontier and exploit the other side to their own advantage—be this the acquisition of new farmland for settled peasants, loot for nomadic warriors, or laying hands on anything else unavailable in one's own zone. Given this scenario, areas close to the frontier experienced violence and other disrupting events relatively often and, as a consequence, were rather prone to political instability.<sup>8</sup>

Consisting largely of semi-dry plains and forests and dominated by Maravas, Ramnad was a frontier kingdom par excellence. Contrary to, for instance, its northern neighbour Thanjavur (or Tanjore) with its many densely populated, fertile river valleys and large-scale wet land agriculture,<sup>9</sup> in Ramnad sedentary areas like towns and farmland were limited in size and surrounded by jungles and their wandering inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> The inner frontier complete with its destabilising influences was therefore omnipresent in the kingdom. In fact, Ramnad owed its very existence to the ambivalent friction between kings and bandits, which was related to the region's ancient sanctuaries at the Setu and particularly at Ramesvaram. The Setu ("bridge," called Adam's Bridge by Europeans) was a string of small, partly submerged, sandbanks and rocky islets stretching from mainland India to the island of Ceylon at the site where the two shores lie closest to each other. Legend has it that the Setu was built by the monkey king, Hanuman, as a bridge to enable the divine Lord Rama to cross the waters and rescue his wife, Sita, after her abduction by the demon king, Ravana. When the latter had been slain, Rama established a shrine at Ramesvaram on an

<sup>8</sup> Jos Gommans, "The Silent Frontier of South Asia," *Journal of World History* 9.1 (1998): passim, especially 2-4; Gommans, "The Embarrassment of Political Violence in Europe and South Asia, c. 1100-1800," in *Violence Denied. Violence, Non-Violence and the Rationalization of Violence in South Asian Cultural History*, ed. Jan E.M. Houben and Karel R. van Kooij (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1999), passim, especially 301-4; J.C. Heesterman, "Western Expansion, Indian Reaction: Mughal Empire and British Raj," in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*, ed. J.C. Heesterman (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 170-3. See also Gommans, "The Eurasian Frontier After the First Millennium A.D.: Reflections along the Fringe of Time and Space," *The Medieval History Journal* 1.1 (1998): passim; Heesterman, "Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin," *Modern Asian Studies* 29.3 (1995): passim, especially 644-9; Heesterman, "The 'Hindu Frontier,'" *Itinerario* 13.1 (1989): 13-4.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Spate, *India and Pakistan*, 719-24.

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the secondary literature, see also Leiden University Library, Bodel Nijenhuis collection (maps) P176 N61: map of South India and northern Ceylon, 1788, showing Ramnad covered with tracts of jungle.

island in the Setu just opposite the Indian coast. In the course of time, the Ramanathasvami Temple, which grew into an important pilgrimage site, was constructed at this spot.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the area later to be covered by Ramnad—including Ramesvaram and the Setu—was nominally part of the kingdom of Madurai, ruled by the Nayakas, but actually found itself in a state of anarchy as the region's dense jungles were infested with bandits. Making the pilgrimage to the isolated island-temple and the other sacred places a dangerous venture. Therefore, around 1605 when the guru (spiritual teacher) of the Madurai Nayaka paid a visit to Ramesvaram Island, he was protected by one Sadaika Tevar. Consequently, Sadaika, who belonged to the Marava jati and himself lived in the Ramnad area, received some land grants and other honours from the grateful Nayaka. Sadaika then returned to Ramnad where he subdued a number of rebellious chiefs and levied taxes for the Nayaka. The latter was again very pleased and this time Sadaika, who acquired many more marks of honour, was installed as ruler of Ramnad (subordinate to the Nayaka, to be sure) under the title of Setupati ("Lord of the Bridge")<sup>12</sup> and subsequently built a mud fort at the town of Ramanathapuram. Incidentally, in addition to his duty of suppressing indigenous bandits, Sadaika was also appointed to curtail the power of another community that threatened the Nayakas: the Portuguese, who were effectively controlling the coastal strip of Madurai.

The foundation of Ramnad provides an excellent example of a roaming, powerful Marava "bandit" crossing the socio-ecological frontier, settling down, being incorporated into a king's realm, and assuming regal power himself. The fact that nowhere is there any mention of where Sadaika Tevar came from exactly, and that at that time Ramnad was covered with forests and was in a state of disorder, suggests that he led a vagrant life at the time he protected the Nayaka's guru. Considering his success, he must have been some local chief, commanding a number of capable warriors and wielding substantial power in

<sup>11</sup> Literature concerning Ramesvaram includes Jas. Burgess, "The Ritual of Ramesvaram," *The Indian Antiquary* 12 (1883): 315-26; N. Vanamamalai Pillai, *Temples of the Setu and Rameswaram* (Delhi: Kunj Publishing House, 1982); Carol Appadurai Breckenridge, "From Protector to Litigant—Changing Relations between Hindu Temples and the Raja of Ramnad," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 14.1 (1977): 75-106; Jean Deloche, "Le chenal de Pampan et la route de pèlerinage de Ramesvaram: un exemple d'aménagement ancien," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 74 (1985): 167-82; G. Sethuraman, *Ramesvaram Temple (History, Art and Architecture)* (Madurai: J.J. Publications, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> The Setupati dynasty claimed to be of high antiquity: by tradition it descended from a certain Guha who had assisted Rama in his defeat of Ravana and was subsequently installed by Rama as the first Setupati.

the area around Ramesvaram Island. In all probability, he was hardly distinguishable from the very same bandits he had to keep at bay and whom he subjected soon after. With his recognition by the Nayaka, Sadaika became a servant. Incorporated into the Madurai kingdom, he now acted on behalf of and for the benefit of his master, and so his military power was apparently brought under control. His construction of a fort and the official acquisition of a dynastic title marked his growing stature as a fully sedentarised, "little" king.<sup>13</sup>

During the following decades, Sadaika's successors continued ascending the ladder from robber to ruler. Raghunatha Setupati also served as a watchman for his overlord when Madurai was threatened by a hostile invasion in the 1650s. Raghunatha mobilised a huge army and saved the Nayaka kingdom. The Madurai ruler, Tirumalai Nayaka, was so grateful that not only did he donate a golden, lion-faced palanquin—symbol of Nayaka kingship—and revoke the Setupatis' obligation to pay tribute, but he also bestowed his own name on Raghunatha (henceforth known as Tirumalai Setupati) and included him within the Kumaravarkkam, the order of the king's sons or princes. The Nayaka's expression of his relationship with Raghunatha in terms of kinship—father and son—was meant to incorporate the Setupati more firmly into his realm and in particular to bind him with moral obligations. It can be argued that by the gift of his name, the Nayaka even shared his identity. In a sense, Raghunatha had now become one with his overlord, and mutual assault would therefore be tantamount to suicide.<sup>14</sup> The Setupati could not rise any higher on the royal ladder and hopefully what he had achieved would keep him satisfied. Tirumalai Nayaka was apparently not only grateful to Raghunatha Setupati but very impressed (or downright terrified) by the military power available to the Marava king. Ironically, the new privileges granted the Setupatis, meant to honour them but also to keep them under control, clearly indicated how powerful they had grown. The dynasty was only nominally still subordinate to the Nayakas.

Raghunatha Setupati's new status did indeed mark the withdrawal of Ramnad from owing loyalty to the Madurai kings. When the Nayakas faced other hostile attacks, the Setupatis usually refused to send their army. Madurai's subsequent punitive expeditions were mostly doomed to failure defeated by the

<sup>13</sup> The analysis of the origin of the Setupati dynasty in terms of bandit and king is largely based on Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown. Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), ch. 2, especially 101-6. For a more general description of the transition from robber to ruler, see Shulman, *The King and the Clown*, 366-73.

<sup>14</sup> Price, *Kingship and Political Practice*, 29-31; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, 101-6; Richard H. Davis, "Indian Art Objects as Loot," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52.1 (1993): 35-6.

Maravas' shrewd use of their intimate knowledge of the Ramnad landscape. The Setupatis meanwhile consolidated their royal and military position by religious endowments, patronage of arts, the performance of great Hindu ceremonies, and the replacement of the mud walls of the fort at Ramanathapuram by stone fortifications. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ramnad had grown into an "independent" kingdom in the sense that for all practical purposes the Setupatis served no overlord. The erstwhile Marava bandit and jungle-dweller had entered the sedentary world as the servant of a king and then risen to royal heights himself. As we shall see, however, the new ruler for his part was constantly threatened by other robbers. The Dutch sources show that in eighteenth-century Ramnad the interaction between kings and bandits was still very much a reality.

### DUTCH BARGAINS

The VOC first appeared in Ramnad in the 1650s, when it expelled the Portuguese from South India and Ceylon. From 1658, the Company entered into a number of treaties with the Setupatis.<sup>15</sup> In addition to its commercial benefits, Ramnad was important to the Dutch because of its location on the Fishery Coast, its name referring to the lucrative pearl fisheries, which under the VOC

<sup>15</sup> Literature on Dutch-Ramnad relations deals principally with the seventeenth century. See Sinnappah Arasaratnam, "Commercial Policies of the Sethupathis of Ramanathapuram 1660-1690," in *Proceedings of the Second International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies*, vol. 2, ed. R.E. Asher (Madras: International Association of Tamil Research, 1968), 251-6; Arasaratnam, "The Politics of Commerce in the Coastal Kingdoms of Tamil Nad, 1650-1700," *South Asia. Journal of South Asian Studies* 1 (1971): 1-19; David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Prince of Poets and Ports: Citakkati, the Maraikkayars and Ramnad, ca. 1690-1710," in *Islam and Indian Regions*, vol. 1, ed. Anna Liberia Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallement (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 497-535; Markus P.M. Vink, "Images and Ideologies of Dutch-South Asian Contact. Cross-Cultural Encounters between the Nayaka State of Madurai and the Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth Century," *Itinerario* 21.2 (1997): 82-123; Vink, "Encounters on the opposite coast. Cross-cultural contacts between the Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka state of Madurai," (unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1998). See also the published primary sources *Dagh-register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts-India* (1628-82), 31 vols., ed. H.T. Colenbrander et al. (Batavia/The Hague: Nijhoff et al., 1887-1931); *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlando-Indicum. Verzameling van Politieke Contracten en verdere Verdragen door de Nederlanders in het Oosten gesloten, van Privelegebriefen aan hen verleend, enz.*, 6 vols., ed. J.E. Heeres and F.W. Stapel (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1907-55); *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der VOC*, 10 vols., ed. W.Ph. Coolhaas, J. van Goor and J.E. Schooneveld-Oosterling (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960-97).

administration stretched from Cape Comorin all the way to Point Calimere.<sup>16</sup> Given its strategic location, the Marava kingdom played a vital role in the Dutch ambition to dominate the seas between the Indian and Ceylonese coasts. Moreover, Ramnad controlled the main (and for large vessels the sole) passage through the Setu between the two shores. This was the Pamban Channel, separating Ramesvaram Island from the Indian mainland. Consequently, the Dutch-Ramnad treaties stipulated that the Setupatis were to close all their waters to other European traders and indigenous “smugglers,” as the VOC claimed monopolies on the sea routes to Ceylon and other parts of India, and on various commodities, such as areca nuts, pepper, *chanks* (conch shells), and saya roots. In return, the Dutch guaranteed to offer protection in the event of an enemy foray, access to ports under VOC supervision, and the payment of customs duties. From the very beginning, however, the treaties were not honoured. The Setupatis, who saw their kingdom being commercially strangled by the Dutch regulations, often tolerated “smuggling” or even actively encouraged it, which frequently led to conflicts and occasionally to armed confrontations.

Probably because of these disputes, in 1690 the VOC established a trading factory in Ramnad at Kilakkarai.<sup>17</sup> This town had long been one of South India’s principal mercantile ports and was home to a sizeable community of powerful Muslim sea traders of Arab descent, many of them known as Maraikayars.<sup>18</sup> They suffered badly under the monopolistic ambitions of the Dutch and, not surprisingly, took a major part in “smuggling.” Keeping a close eye on

<sup>16</sup> ARA, Verzameling Leupe (maps) 231; 1078: maps of South India and Thanjavur, c. 1690.

<sup>17</sup> For the establishment of this factory, see ARA, VOC 1469, f. 413; VOC 1491, f. 595; VOC 1505, ff. 1142v-5. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the share of Kilakkarai in the profits from sales on the Fishery Coast was often about half or one-third and could be as high as three-quarters. (The Fishery Coast as a whole usually contributed to around fifteen to twenty percent of the total profits made in the Ceylon Government but was responsible for a much smaller part of the expenses.) The most profitable products sold at Kilakkarai were Japanese copper, pepper, cloves, and tin. The purchase, which was much more extensive than the sale, consisted principally of maritime commodities and textiles. See e.g. the annual charts of sold products, profits, and expenses at the Fishery Coast and Ceylon in ARA, VOC 1053-3987: *overgekomen brieven en papieren* series, and VOC 2428, f. 360: essay by Governor Van Imhoff of Ceylon about the trade on the Fishery Coast, 1738. For a survey of the principal sold products and profits at Kilakkarai between 1697 and 1738, see ARA, VOC 2428, f. 513.

<sup>18</sup> For Kilakkarai and its Muslim traders, see e.g. Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 78-90; Shulman and Subrahmanyam, “Prince of Poets and Ports,” *passim*.

them must have been an important reason behind the decision of the VOC to settle at Kilakkrai, but the strategic location of the port was also advantageous. It was an excellent base for maintaining a close watch on activities around the Pamban Channel which ran counter to the Dutch-Ramnad treaties. Besides, the town was situated at one end of the so-called “land-road,” which connected the Fishery Coast south of the Pamban Channel with the shores north of it. This overland route was especially important when the Channel could not be traversed because of natural or political circumstances.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Kilakkrai was close to the important market town of “Pativenalur,” “twelve hours” west of Ramanathapuram. Merchants from the Fishery and Coromandel Coasts met here to conduct business, such as cattle trading. Its weekly market was the sole place where the Ramnad coinage, called “chiuli” fanams and only valid in Ramnad itself, could be changed for other currencies.<sup>20</sup>

The Dutch presence at Kilakkrai was turbulent from beginning to end. Trade disagreements with Maraikkayars frequently arose and would sometimes escalate into fatal clashes. In the decades around 1700, the Kilakkrai Maraikkayars (and their anti-VOC sentiments) were supervised by the very influential Periya Tambis. The Setupati Kilavan installed various members of this mercantile family as his local representative-cum-tax-collector—Regent of the Lowlands (*benedenlanden*), as the Dutch used to call this functionary—and allowed them to bear the names of the dynasty, “Vijaya Raghunatha.” Again, these appointments and name-sharing reflected attempts by the ruler to embrace a powerful community at the fringe of the settled world. Ramnad’s long shoreline appears to have functioned as a second frontier besides the inner frontier: one between the settled areas and the marginal maritime life, off the coast and on the ocean. To

<sup>19</sup> For the “land-road,” see e.g. ARA, VOC 2158, f. 958v; VOC 2185, f. 1173v; VOC 2224, f. 1624v; VOC 2308, ff. 2052-3, 2055v-6v; VOC 2925, f. 844: letters from Tuticorin to Colombo, 1730-1, 1734, 1758, report of the VOC embassy to the Setupati, 1731.

<sup>20</sup> The following approximate exchange rates seem to have been common in the 1730s: 12 Ramnad “chiuli” fanams equalled 9 Madurai fanams, 1 pardao, half a pagoda, 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> or 1.75 rupees, 3 Dutch guilders, and 5 British sterlings. See e.g. ARA, VOC 2185, f. 1066; VOC 2224, f. 1624: documents from 1731; Sinnappah Arasarathnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast 1650-1740* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 295, 306, 318-20. For Pativenalur, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2158, ff. 946, 950v-1, 954-8v; VOC 2186, ff. 1222v-3, 1280; VOC 2246, ff. 124-5; VOC 2428, f. 363; VOC 2523, f. 1399; VOC 3082, f. 1159v: correspondence between Kilakkrai, Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1729-31, 1741, 1764, documents by VOC Governors of Ceylon from 1732, 1738; ARA, Ministerie van Koloniën (maps) W 37: map of South India, 1750s; Jacobus Mossel, *Beknopte historie van het Mogolsche keyzerryk en de zuydelyke aangrenzende ryken* (Batavia: C.C. Renhard, Casteele drukkerij, 1758), 91 (to be found in ARA, Van Ghesel collection 188); *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlando-Indicum*, vol. 4, 146-50. I have not been able to locate present-day Pativenalur. Possibly, it is Partibanur, roughly halfway between Ramnad and Madurai.

a certain extent, the sea resembled the wilderness as both posed dangers and yielded riches.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Ramnad was in fact a kingdom with a “dual” frontier where the sedentary centre interacted with the worlds of both the jungle and the sea. Consequently, as coastal traders, the Maraikkayars were in some ways comparable to the bandits of the forests and the semi-arid plains. Their ships and connections with other parts of the Indian Ocean made them mobile. As Muslims claiming a Middle Eastern origin, the Maraikkayars were rather detached from the Hindu hierarchy. Because of the wealth generated by their trade, Ramnad was able to profit from their presence, but they also might (and sometimes actually did) vie with the Setupatis in the struggle for power. The incorporation of the Periya Tambis was therefore a shrewd move to bind and control them, which they for their part were more than willing to accept because this only increased their political influence and prestige. Around 1710, however, the Periya Tambis had fallen from grace and were removed from office, much to the relief of the Dutch.<sup>22</sup> The VOC despised most of the Ramnad Maraikkayars for their commercial and political ambitions. Little did the Dutch know that they themselves were also perceived as bandit-like intruders into the settled world who were in competition with the Setupatis.

#### THE PARTITION OF GREATER RAMNAD

Apart from the Maraikkayars and the VOC, there were internal contestants for power in the Marava kingdom. Ramnad's dynastic history offers examples of many instances when the Setupati's position was being disputed or overshadowed by members of the royal family, military commanders, and other courtiers.<sup>23</sup> One such case was the usurpation of Bhavani Sankara's rule by Kattaya Tevar

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 336-9; Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 299; Heesterman, “The ‘Hindu Frontier’,” 13-4.

<sup>22</sup> For the Periya Tambis, see e.g. Shulman and Subrahmanyam, “Prince of Poets and Ports,” *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> The VOC sources give years of reign that occasionally differ from those mentioned in secondary literature but often are very specific and therefore likely to be accurate. For the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, the Dutch dates (and, in one case, the exact hour!) are as follows:

• Kilavan (Raghunatha Setupati)	(early 1670s)	1710, October 12 (d.)
• Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati (Thiru Udaya Tevar)	1710, October 12	1725, Apr. 8, 4 p.m. (d.)
• Tanda Tevar (Sundaresvar) (reign is unsure)	1725, April	1725, c. September

in 1729, which led to the partition of Ramnad. The description of these events in the VOC sources differs considerably from what appears in the secondary literature.<sup>24</sup> The latter portrays the partition as fairly peaceful, but according to the Dutch matters did not actually develop in an amicable atmosphere and were largely determined by what might be called bandits.

Bhavani Sankara was an illegitimate son of the Setupati Kilavan and therefore not a legal heir when his father died in 1710. Undeterred by his seemingly untenable position, after the death of Kilavan's successor, Vijaya Raghunatha, in 1725, Bhavani usurped the Setupati throne with the help of the Maratha king of Thanjavur, north of Ramnad. The latter, Raja Serfoji I, assisted Bhavani on the condition that he would return some land once conquered from Thanjavur by Kilavan.<sup>25</sup> Upon Bhavani's instalment, another contender for the Ramnad throne, Kattaya Tevar, fled to Thanjavur (of all places). Kattaya was a member of the royal family and a local chief at Arantangi in the north of the kingdom. After some time, he was joined in Thanjavur by another refugee from Ramnad, Sasivarna Tevar. This Marava—also related to the royal family through his marriage with a daughter of the late Vijaya Raghunatha—was a local chief at Nalkottai in north-western Ramnad but had been dislodged by Bhavani Sankara. Smarting under his treatment, Sasivarna would thus be a valuable ally in Kattaya Tevar's struggle against Bhavani. At the Thanjavur court, Kattaya and

• Bhavani Sankara	1725, April or Sep.*	1729, September
• Kattaya Tevar (Kumara Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati)	1729, September 17	1735, August 12 (d.)**
• Sivakumara Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati	1735, August 14	1748, December 24 (d.)
• Rakka Tevar	1748, December 26	1749, c. December
• Sella Tevar (Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati)	1749, c. December	1763, January 30 (d.)
• Muthu Ramalinga Setupati	1763	1772

See e.g. ARA, VOC 1788, f. 1493; VOC 2026, f. 834v; VOC 2044, ff. 94v-5; VOC 2046, ff. 762-v; VOC 2158, ff. 948v, 950-v; VOC 2337, ff. 1543-v, 1579; VOC 2733, ff. 18-v, 33v; VOC 2735, ff. 1052v-3v; VOC 2757, f. 1474; VOC 3082, ff. 1157-v; VOC 3348, f. 399.

\* Bhavani was installed in April but captured the capital from some rivals only in September.  
\*\* Kattaya died from a cold, a fever, and a lump on one of his thighs.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice*, 27-8, 36-7; Seshadri, "The Setupatis of Ramnad," 77-96; Kadhirvel, *A History of the Maravas*, 50-62; Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, 180, 226, 243-4. For yet another version of the partition, given by the Thanjavur king in the 1770s, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Penumbral Visions. Making Polities in Early Modern South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 160-1.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the aforementioned secondary literature, see for Bhavani Sankara's usurpation ARA, VOC 2026, ff. 834-5; VOC 2044, ff. 94v-5; VOC 2046, ff. 762-v; correspondence between Kilakkrai, Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1725-6, letter from Bhavani Sankara to Governor Hertenberg of Ceylon, 1725.

Sasivarna behaved in a manner befitting Maravas with monarchical ambitions. Both performed many heroic, martial feats: a dangerous tiger was killed, combat duels were won, and an assassination attempt on the Thanjavur king was thwarted by either one of them. The impressed Serfoji recognised their valour and decided to help Kattaya and Sasivarna attack Bhavani Sankara. He was certainly strengthened in his resolve because Bhavani had never kept to his promise to return the area claimed by the Thanjavur king. Serfoji now attached the same condition to his support of Kattaya and Sasivarna. The two naturally complied and in 1729 they invaded Ramnad with the assistance of the Thanjavur army. Serfoji's real intentions soon became clear. After the north of Ramnad was conquered, the Thanjavur king literally tried to divide and rule. He made Bhavani Sankara a proposal in which he suggested Ramnad (excluding the lands claimed by Thanjavur, of course) be partitioned into three and distributed among the three contenders. Bhavani refused and preferred to fight to the end. He was soon defeated by the Thanjavur army and in September Serfoji installed Kattaya Tevar as the new Setupati.

Although Serfoji had not succeeded in partitioning Ramnad into three, he fared well after Bhavani's downfall. Thanjavur annexed Ramnad's northern lands, gaining almost half its area. Moreover, Serfoji gave the remainder of the kingdom as a land grant to Kattaya and Sasivarna—except for the capital Ramanathapuram, which as the Setupati seat was assigned to Kattaya only—with the instruction to divide it equally between them. As was to be expected, Serfoji's (probably deliberately) ambiguous orders sowed discord between the two Maravas and weakened Ramnad's power still more. Sasivarna was highly discontented with the arrangements and seems to have aspired to the Ramnad throne himself. He departed for a town near Pativenalur with its important weekly market and began a struggle against Kattaya until Serfoji of Thanjavur could bring himself to specify which areas were to be granted to each of them (which, not surprisingly, never happened). The VOC sources state that both men now tried to enlist the support of as many "Marrua [Marava] robber-leaders" as possible. Some of these robbers were actually local chiefs, others were really leaders of roaming robber-bands, many were probably both. As mentioned earlier, robbing and ruling were not mutually exclusive and often complementary, something the Dutch were aware of as well. According to them, Kattaya and Sasivarna were dependent on these warriors for the consolidation of their power. In October Kattaya tried to win some of the most important warrior chiefs over and invited them to the capital to pardon them for certain crimes. Presumably they were unimpressed by this gesture because as soon as they had left the Setupati, they plundered the town and its environs with

Kattaya looking on from his fort without being able to interfere as he had only a small number of soldiers at his disposal.

In the course of time, many chiefs sided with Sasivarna Tevar who took possession of Pativenalur and grew increasingly powerful. A number of the common people and even some of Kattaya's main servants also deserted the Setupati and went over to his rival. The Dutch believed that Kattaya had now become completely dependent on the Thanjavur king for his position. To make matters worse for the Setupati, on 16 November 1729 Serfoji passed away and was succeeded by his brother Tukkoji. The new Thanjavur king was bedridden stricken by gangrene in his thigh, which only lessened Kattaya's credit among the warrior chiefs. Meanwhile, Sasivarna had allied himself with the Nayaka of Madurai and the Dutch expected that this coalition would attack the Setupati as soon as Tukkoji died. It is remarkable that Kattaya now started using the name of the Thanjavur king in addition to his own names and continued to do so for about a year after his installation as Setupati. This seemed a way of showing his loyalty to Tukkoji and creating a bond. In a sense, he incorporated himself into the Thanjavur realm and thereby attempted to secure the support of his patron. Whatever his motives, by early 1731 Kattaya had dropped the name and his position appeared to have somewhat stabilised at that time.<sup>26</sup> Tukkoji managed to remain alive and Kattaya begot a son who was "from the direct Marrua line" (the future Setupati Sivakumara), which according to VOC officials at Tuticorin was very important for the consolidation of kingship. Meanwhile, disagreements were stirring among the chiefs and it seems that some of them decided to be loyal to Kattaya.

Thus, two separate kingdoms gradually emerged from the chaos after the defeat of Bhavani Sankara: Sivaganga, centred on the town of the same name and its environs, including the important weekly market of Pativenalur, ruled by Sasivarna Tevar; and a much shrunken Ramnad, with the old capital Ramanathapuram and the Setu with Ramesvaram Island, ruled by Kattaya Tevar, the Setupati. Nevertheless, for decades Sasivarna (who died in early 1739) and his

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<sup>26</sup> In 1732, however, Tukkoji attacked Ramnad twice because Kattaya had not paid him the 50,000 pardaos that had apparently been demanded by Tukkoji in return for his support against Bhavani Sankara. The Thanjavur army was not able to defeat Kattaya even though its ranks now featured Bhavani again! See e.g. ARA, VOC 2185, ff. 1167-v; VOC 2224, ff. 1611v-9; VOC 2290, ff. 253-4; VOC 2291, ff. 497-8: report of a VOC embassy by *Resident Reynier Helmondt* at Kilakkrai to Kattaya, 1731, correspondence between Kilakkrai, Tuticorin, and Colombo, 1732-33. For Kattaya's names, see ARA, VOC 2158, f. 955v; VOC 2185, ff. 1053v, 1170; VOC 2186, ff. 1242, 1288: letter from Tuticorin to Colombo, report of a VOC embassy by Helmondt to Kattaya, and letters from him to VOC officials at Kilakkrai and Colombo, all 1730-1.

successors maintained their claim to the Setupati throne and waged many a war against Ramnad.<sup>27</sup>

### A MILLION MUTINIES THEN

The partition of Ramnad is exemplary in several ways: permanent competition at the fluid court, the dominant role of conflict in the society, the influence of bandits or local chiefs, and the involvement of other kingdoms. These were all recurrent themes in the Ramnad politics. Hardly any of the eighteenth-century Setupatis secured his position without a struggle; none of them held absolute power. Their servants were generally keen to take over and seized every opportunity to do so. The Setupatis Sivakumara, Sella Tevar, and Muthu Ramalinga, who were all minors when their “reigns” commenced, naturally served as mere figureheads, but Rakka Tevar and even Kattaya Tevar were also at least temporarily overshadowed by others. In his letter to Colombo of August 1731, *Opperhoofd* (chief-factor) Daniel Overbeek of the Fishery Coast draws a picture of the balance of power at the Ramnad court in no uncertain terms:

The cannecappel [*kanakkuppillai*: indigenous clerk] whom I have sent to the court of the Theuver [Kattaya Tevar] has not been able to achieve anything other than that he has noticed that even the lowest betel-bearer [*betel*: nut] there understands more than His Excellency the lord of the woods [*woudheer*, i.e. Kattaya] himself. Yes! So much, that a pupil of that idiot [Kattaya], to his own face and in the presence of all the courtiers, nullified the word that had been given by that king to the delegated cannecappel Philip and which had already been signed on a blank ola [*olai*: palm leaf letter] to the effect that his subjects were all ordered to pay [their debts to the VOC; the nullification took place] under the pretext that if those people were to fail [to pay], the Honourable Company [VOC] would always hold His Excellency responsible. Thus, that ola was destroyed . . .<sup>28</sup>

Having already lost more than half of his kingdom to Thanjavur and Sivaganga, Kattaya seems to have entrusted the remainder of Ramnad to the hands of a Maraikkayar at Kilakkrai called Labbai Nayinar,<sup>29</sup> who compares well with the

<sup>27</sup> For the partition of Ramnad, see ARA, VOC 2158, ff. 946-57v: letters from Tuticorin to Colombo, 1729-30. For Sivaganga’s claims and attacks, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2337, ff. 1543v-7v; VOC 2403, ff. 1938-v; VOC 2599, ff. 2310v-1; VOC 2666, ff. 2321-3: correspondence between Tuticorin and Colombo, 1735, 1737, 1743, letter from the king of Sivaganga to *Opperhoofd* (chief-factor) Domburg at Tuticorin, 1746. For Sasivarna Tevar’s death, see ARA, VOC 2456, f. 217; VOC 2459, f. 1599v: correspondence between Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, March-May 1739.

<sup>28</sup> ARA, VOC 2186, ff. 1307-8.

<sup>29</sup> While the term “Maraikkayar” generally seems to denote a higher status than “Labbai,” this distinction appears to have hardly been observed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ramnad. In any case, Labbai Nayinar Maraikkayar obviously bore both titles.

Periya Tambi family. Like them, he had been appointed Regent of the Lowlands and permitted to use the Setupati names "Vijaya Raghunatha," reflecting another effort by the king to incorporate a powerful and possibly threatening figure within his own circle. Again, this attempt was hazardous as Labbai Nayinar turned out to be a real threat. In the report of his embassy to Ramanathapuram in January 1731, the "fraudulent" *Resident* Reynier Helmondт wrote that the Regent had become the most powerful man in Ramnad, enjoyed the protection of the king of Thanjavur, and completely dominated Kattaya. Even though the embassy was partially dispatched to protest against Labbai Nayinar's frequent violations of the Dutch-Ramnad treaties, the Regent himself was present at all audiences, either inciting the Setupati or bluntly interrupting his master and taking over the negotiations. It was obvious that Labbai Nayinar (and indeed the entire court) kept Kattaya in the dark. The Setupati was illiterate and as a newcomer to the capital had no idea what agreements had been made with the VOC. Although the numerous Dutch complaints about Ramnad's breaches of contract were usually well founded, the behaviour of Labbai Nayinar (and many others in the kingdom) was understandable enough. The presence of the VOC and its monopolistic claims greatly frustrated the Regent's own commercial ambitions. Furthermore, the great value attached to treaties by the Dutch, was not shared by the inhabitants of Ramnad, who saw contracts at best as a starting point for further negotiations. In short, manipulating his overlord seemed the most effective way for Labbai Nayinar to enhance his position.

Ramnad's myriad of other participants in the struggle for power, however, led to Labbai Nayinar's downfall. When the Dutch were having difficulties collecting the debts resulting from the pecuniary leniency of the deceased *Resident* Helmondт, the Regent discretely endeavoured to mediate between the VOC and Kattaya and others indebted to the Company. The Dutch thought this sudden cooperation of Labbai Nayinar highly suspicious. Was the Regent sincerely trying to solve the financial disputes or was he attempting to secure his position, bearing in mind that the Setupati's reign was still rather unstable? On one occasion, Labbai Nayinar hinted that if the VOC wished to build a fort at Kilakkarai, Kattaya might not object. The Regent added that he himself would always support the Dutch, even if the Setupati would be dethroned. Opperhoofd Overbeek at Tuticorin ignored the offer and wrote to Colombo that he actually suspected Kattaya himself of suggesting the building of a VOC fort because such a stronghold might serve as a retreat if the Setupati was attacked. Moreover, by taking refuge with the Dutch, Kattaya would draw them into the conflict as well in an attempt to deter his opponents.

Whether Labbai Nayinar was following his master's orders or not, he was walking a tightrope. On the one hand, he could not exert his influence on the

Setupati too openly in favour of the VOC. The Regent faced competition from other nobles in the kingdom, who might accuse him of (too much) disloyalty. On the other hand, winning the confidence of the Dutch was not only important were Kattaya to fall, but also for getting permission to partake in the forthcoming pearl fishing. In the end, it was Kattaya himself who dropped Labbai Nayinar. If the Regent had really approached the Dutch on behalf of the Setupati, he had not succeeded in having the fort that Kattaya had apparently desired built. If he had actually acted on his own behalf, his flattering of the Company when Kattaya's kingship was under threat, had probably not passed unnoticed at the court. Whatever the truth, Labbai Nayinar no longer served any purpose as a servant and was blamed for having made the problems between Ramnad and the VOC only worse by his dealings. The Regent was removed from office in perpetuity, due, it seems, to a combination of wrong assessments, abuse by his overlord, and competition at court.<sup>30</sup>

Although Labbai Nayinar failed to consolidate his power, other servants of the Setupati were more successful in retaining their supreme position once they had taken over. One of them was Muthu Vairavanatha (or Vairavar) Servaikkarar, who held the position of *Dalavay* and thus functioned both as the prime minister and commander-in-chief of Ramnad. His chance came when Kattaya died in August 1735. The son of the latter, the five-year old Sivakumara, was installed as the new Setupati with the provision that during his minority Dalavay Vairavanatha would be his guardian and rule Ramnad on his behalf. Vairavanatha, however, henceforth considered the kingdom his own and for all practical purposes behaved like a king himself. Like many Setupatis before him, he selected a Maraikkayar leader as his protégé. This was a certain Nongu Muthu, who was appointed Regent of the Lowlands and who possibly received his second name from the Dalavay in yet another attempt to strengthen and safeguard a delicate relationship. According to the Dutch *Resident* at Kilakkrai, Wouter Trek, the Dalavay provided his protection in exchange for part of the profits that Nongu Muthu made on his diving for chanks, which were the monopoly of the VOC. The *Pradani* (minister of finance), named Ramalingam Pillai, would occasionally be given some money as well in order to enlist and

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<sup>30</sup> For Labbai Nayinar Maraikkayar under Bhavani Sankara and Kattaya Tevar, see e.g. ARA, VOC 1924, ff. 843-v; VOC 2068, ff. 1375-v; VOC 2185, ff. 1053v-62, 1167-87; VOC 2186, ff. 1215-34, 1274-80v, 1312-v; VOC 2224, ff. 1508-9; VOC 2245, ff. 328-9, 1623-8; VOC 2291, ff. 497-517; VOC 2308, ff. 2056v-83v: correspondence between Kilakkrai, Tuticorin, and Colombo, 1723, 1731-4, judicial document, 1727, correspondence between Kattaya and Labbai Nayinar and the VOC, 1731, 1734, report of a VOC embassy by Reynier Helmond to Kattaya, 1731, report of the journey by Governor Versluyss of Ceylon to the Fishery Coast, 1732.

secure his support. In 1736, when the Dutch dispatched an embassy to the Ramnad court to complain about the “illegal” diving, envoy Wouter Trek was—to his amazement—simply told by Vairavanatha and Ramalingam that they wished to receive some extra gifts (over and above the usual ones) before they could grant an audience with the minor Setupati (at which the Dalavay would conduct the negotiations anyway). To the indignation of the VOC, the same condition was made in 1741 when the Company requested a reduction in the tolls levied at Kilakkrai. These had recently been raised on the occasion of the consecration of Sivakumara (now about eleven years old) as Setupati at the Ramanathasvami Temple at Ramesvaram. Apparently, the boy was considered to have reached adulthood, but after that ceremony, which should have marked the end of Vairavanatha’s guardianship, the Dalavay remained the most powerful man in Ramnad, both according to other nobles at the court and in the opinion of the VOC. Even the fact that Vairavanatha grew blind over the years—the Dutch now referred to him as “that fickle, cross-eyed field-lord”—did not threaten his unshakeable position.<sup>31</sup>

Despite his apparent impregnability, this did not mean that the Dalavay did not face opposition at court. During the embassy of 1736, while in the seclusion of his temporary residence at Ramanathapuram, envoy Wouter Trek was approached several times by Sivakumara’s mother. First, through an interpreter, she let Trek know that he could be assured of her deference; that henceforth she regarded him as her eldest son; and that it was therefore his duty to strive for harmony between the Dutch and Ramnad. Later, Sivakumara’s mother—who did not attend the audiences with the Setupati—visited Trek herself. She asked him not to be offended should he not be received with the proper respect and urged him to consider her son’s tender years. In 1739 she sent delegates<sup>32</sup> and gifts to the Dutch Governor at Colombo, Van Imhoff, to apologise once more

<sup>31</sup> For Dalavay Vairavanatha, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2337, ff. 1543-v; VOC 2374, ff. 2041-76; VOC 2388, ff. 1392-3; VOC 2523, f. 1400; VOC 2559, f. 1463; VOC 2599, ff. 2107-62, 2175-88; VOC 2621, ff. 2190-5; VOC 2642, ff. 141v-2, 176v: correspondence between Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1735-6, 1741, 1743, 1745, reports of the VOC embassies to Sivakumara, 1736, 1743, letter from the VOC to Sivakumara, 1742, correspondence between Vairavanatha and Governor Stein van Gollonnesse of Ceylon, 1744. For Sivakumara’s consecration as Setupati, see ARA, VOC 2523, ff. 1426-v; VOC 2559, f. 1472: letter from Tuticorin to Colombo, 1741, letter from Sivakumara to Governor Overbeek of Ceylon, 1742. See also TNA, DR 353: correspondence between Tuticorin and Cochin (VOC headquarters on the Malabar Coast), 1742-3.

<sup>32</sup> Initially much to the VOC’s dismay, the delegation was headed by the last member of the Periya Tambi family who had served the Setupatis until c. 1710 (see the section “Dutch bargains”). He had now been reinstalled as Regent of the lowlands and had been given permission to bear the names “Vijaya Raghunatha” again. See ARA, VOC 2459, f. 1613v: letter from Sivakumara Setupati to Governor Van Imhoff of Ceylon, 1739.

for Ramnad's repeated offences. When a VOC interpreter was dispatched to the Setupati court with a letter of protest in 1742 because yet another conflict between Ramnad and the VOC had arisen, she openly sided with the Dutch. She ordered Dalavay Vairavanatha to comply with the VOC's requests, but he did not take the slightest notice of her commands. Sivakumara's mother was probably an isolated figure at the court and she must have been horrified by the Dalavay's abuse of her child. She apparently hoped that the Dutch would be able to counterbalance the domination of Vairavanatha and his faction. Calling envoy Trek her eldest son seems to have been an attempt to create a bond and to involve him and his superiors in her struggle against her opponents. Trek may not have been fully aware of it, but Setupati Sivakumara had now become his younger brother whom he was supposed to protect.<sup>33</sup>

When Vairavanatha died around April 1745 during a battle with Sivaganga, nothing changed. The new Dalavay, Vellaiyan Servaikkurar, appeared to be as powerful as his predecessor. According to the VOC records, in December 1748, at the age of eighteen, Setupati Sivakumara passed away very suddenly without any clear cause, which makes one wonder whether he died a natural death. It may very well have been that Dalavay Vellaiyan had decided that Sivakumara was getting too mature. Furthermore, some secondary literature states that it was also Vellaiyan who nominated Sivakumara's successor, his cousin Rakka Tevar.<sup>34</sup> However, his installation was contested by another member of the royal family, the approximately twelve-year old Sella Tevar, or rather a court faction that wished to overthrow Vellaiyan and exploited the boy for this end. While Sella and his followers were supported by Thanjavur, Rakka and his clique tried vainly to court the VOC and get it on their side, but within one year Rakka was "kicked off the throne" (as the Dutch put it) by Vellaiyan himself and replaced by the minor Sella.<sup>35</sup> Rakka had tried to curtail the power of the Dalavay and was therefore imprisoned by him, according to the secondary literature.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For Sivakumara's mother, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2374, ff. 2041-76; VOC 2459, ff. 1615-30; VOC 2559, ff. 1491-2v, 1501-3; VOC 2599, ff. 2107-62: reports of the VOC embassies to Sivakumara, 1736, 1743, letter from Governor Van Imhoff to Sivakumara, 1739, report of Ramnad's embassy to Colombo, 1739, correspondence between Tuticorin and Colombo, 1742.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Raja Ram Rao, *Ramnad Manual*, 237; Seshadri, "The Setupatis of Ramnad," 101-2; Kadhirvel, *A History of the Maravas*, 84-7. According to a Dutch source, it was Sivakumara's mother who nominated his successor; see Mossel, *Beknopte historie*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> For the period 1748-50, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2733, ff. 18-v, 33v-4; VOC 2735, ff. 1051-4; VOC 2757, f. 1474: correspondence between Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1749-50.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Raja Ram Rao, *Ramnad Manual*, 237; Seshadri, "The Setupatis of Ramnad," 101-2.

Sella's death in January 1763 led to an exceptionally grim succession struggle between three court factions, each with its own figurehead. One faction consisted of the former Pradani Damodaram Pillai and the son of the deceased Dalavay Vellaiyan; the second of the current Pradani and his supporters; the third of yet other courtiers. After some time, Damodaram managed to put the two-month old Muthu Ramalinga on the Ramnad throne, after which he himself was reinstated as Pradani and ruled the kingdom in conjunction with Ramalinga's father, Mappillai Tevar (who was the brother-in-law of Sella Tevar). The rival pretenders to the throne and their followers were all beheaded, but animosity immediately arose between Damodaram and Mappillai too. While leading the army in a war against Thanjavur, the Pradani scented a plot hatched by Mappillai to have him killed on the battlefield. Damodaram then made peace with Thanjavur, enlisted the support of Madurai (now annexed by the kingdom of Arcot) and a great number of "robbers" and marched toward Ramanathapuram to oust his opponent. In a frenzy of fear and frustration, Mappillai stabbed Damodaram's wife and brother to death, had some other people decapitated, and jailed the rest of Damodaram's family. He subsequently asked the VOC for help but then suddenly died of chicken pox. With no powerful competitors left, Damodaram invaded the capital and took control of the kingdom.<sup>37</sup>

From the developments in eighteenth-century Ramnad, it appears that the socio-political focus of the kingdom had shifted largely from Nayaka Madurai to Maratha Thanjavur. Both Thanjavur's (often decisive) support to certain factions at the Ramnad court and the many wars fought between the two kingdoms show the important role of Thanjavur, as an epicentre of the settled world, in Ramnad's politics. The Nayakas of Madurai lost all their influence over the Setupatis. After 1736, Ramnad—archetype of a frontier kingdom—actually became a political epicentre in its own right with respect to the Nayakas. In that year, when Madurai was occupied by the troops of the kingdom of Arcot, two surviving members of the dynasty, Bangaru Tirumalai and his son Vijayakumara, fled to Ramnad. Here, this was considered an excellent chance to increase the kingdom's power in relation to its former overlord. In 1739 Dalavay Vairavanatha in alliance with the king of Sivaganga drove the Arcot troops out of Madurai and installed Vijayakumara on the Nayaka

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<sup>37</sup> See ARA, VOC 3082, ff. 1156v-62, 1453-6: correspondence between Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1763-4. The description by the Dutch of the events after Sella Tevar's death differs a great deal from what appears in secondary literature. See Seshadri, "The Setupatis of Ramnad," 120-3; Kadirvel, *A History of the Maravas*, 142-6. The Dutch records are somewhat unclear about Mappillai Tevar's murders: in his panic he may have stabbed his own wife and brother to death rather than those of Damodaram Pillai.

throne.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the Dalavay removed the sacred statues from the main temple in Madurai and brought them to Ramnad under the pretext of safeguarding them against future invasions by Arcot.<sup>39</sup> By now, the positions of master and servant had been completely reversed. At this juncture in history, it was Ramnad that appointed the Nayakas as its vassals and hence climbed even higher up on the ladder from robber to ruler. The removal of the Madurai statues served as a further legitimisation of Ramnad's hegemony over the Nayakas.<sup>40</sup> The Setupati was now protecting not just Ramesvaram and the Setu, but also the deities of Madurai—a task the Nayakas were evidently no longer capable of performing. The Nayakas' fall down the ladder did not stop here. When Madurai was invaded by Arcot, the Marathas, and the Nizam of Hyderabad respectively, each time Vijayakumara Nayaka fled to Ramnad and in the end was assigned the rule of some villages there. The Nayakas of Madurai had now definitely fallen back to the rank of chiefdom and lost virtually all power.

### THE LORDS OF THE FOREST

The events described above are only some examples of Ramnad's immutably tumultuous politics. Throughout the eighteenth (and the seventeenth) century, servants of the Setupati attempted and indeed often managed to usurp their master's rule. Obviously, power was determined not so much by one's official position but rather by one's capacities to exploit one's contacts and opportunities. The Dutch were well aware of this constantly changing balance of power in the kingdom. The following table shows that at each embassy dispatched by the VOC to the Setupati, gifts were distributed differently among the officials at the court.

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<sup>38</sup> For Ramnad-Madurai relations from 1736 onward, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2400, ff. 410-1; VOC 2403, ff. 1942-v, 1965-8; VOC 2428, f. 340v; VOC 2445, ff. 1618-9; VOC 2457, f. 1028; VOC 2459, ff. 1599v-606; VOC 2523, ff. 1399-400, 1412-3v; VOC 2599, ff. 2316-v: correspondence between Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1737-9, 1741, 1743, essay by Governor Van Imhoff about the trade on the Fishery Coast, 1738, letter from Setupati Sivakumara to Opperhoofd Busch of the Fishery Coast, 1739; ARA, Hope collection 69, ff. 47-8: historical description of Madurai, 1762. See also K. Rajayyan, "Fall of the Nayaks of Madurai," *Journal of Indian History* 45.3 (1967): 807-15; Kadirvel, *A History of the Maravas*, 79-99, for a partially different version of these events.

<sup>39</sup> "Maduraittala-Varalaru" in Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, 378-9. The sacred images were returned by invading Marathas in 1741.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Davis, "Indian Art Objects as Loot," *passim*.

*Table: distribution of gifts in order of value (top five only) at VOC embassies to the Ramnad court, 1724-43*

1724	1731	1736	1743
1. Setupati Vijaya R.	1. Setupati Kattaya	1. Setupati Sivakumara	1. Setupati Sivakumara
2. four nobles (each)	2. Regent Labbai N.	2. Dalavay Vairavan.	2. Dalavay Vairavan.
3. Regent Labbai N.	3. Pradani Ramal. P.	3. Pradani	3. Setupati's mother
4. Setupati's secretary	4. Dalavay Vairavan.	4. Setupati's mother	4. Pradani
5. Regent's brother	5. Setupati's secretary	5. three nobles (each)	5. some nobles (each)

*Note:* at the embassy of 1759, only a very small “private” gift was brought along in order to teach the Setupati and his nobles a lesson because of their violations of the treaties.

*Source:* ARA, VOC 2009, ff. 1152-5; VOC 2185, ff. 1186-7v; VOC 2374, ff. 2075-6v; VOC 2599, ff. 2160-1; VOC 2956, ff. 1234-7.

Naturally, the Setupati as the official ruler of Ramnad always received the most valuable gifts, but otherwise their value depended on an official's actual power instead of his official function. The table therefore reflects the political careers of people like Regent Labbai Nayinar and Dalavay Vairavanatha as interpreted by the Dutch. The Company's view seems to have been quite accurate since at all embassies virtually none of the many complaints about the gifts concerned their distribution.

As has been explained, the political culture of Ramnad was significantly shaped by the fact that the kingdom was located on a dual frontier between three socio-ecological zones: the sedentary centre embraced on either side by the worlds of the jungle and the sea. Partly because of this dual frontier with all its inherent disruptive and unpredictable influences, the realm was not clearly defined but perceived as open-ended, with non-fixed borders and marked by overlapping claims by an endless array of co-sharers. This infinite and at the same time changeable character of the kingdom caused political power to be dependent largely on a person's capability to forge alliances and exploit conflicts. If one's position in the balance of power was uncertain, one had to keep all options open. Hence, Ramnad's politics were typified by factionalism, shifting alliances, conspiracy, divided loyalties, the sowing of discord, the luring of servants away from opponents, and other such manoeuvres. As a result, dominion over the kingdom was actually shared by many different parties, which alternately became more and less influential, without absolute power ever being assumed by just one person. Of course, this was not unique to Ramnad,<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cf. e.g. Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, 310-1; Heesterman, “Western Expansion, Indian Reaction,” 166-73; Heesterman, “Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin,” 650-1; André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty. Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha*

but the dominant presence of two types of frontiers throughout the kingdom played an important role in making it an outstanding example of this political culture. The balance of power seems to have been exceptionally unstable in Ramnad partly because of the continuous threat and appeal posed by both the jungle and the sea.

Interestingly, in addition to the Setupatis, almost everyone who attained political power in the kingdom was also involved in the two other activities that had been the mainstays of the Setupatis' rise to kingship too: religious endowments and commercial enterprise. Besides the Setupatis, both high-ranking Hindu officials and Maraikkayar leaders patronised their respective religions. The Dalavays Vairavanatha and Vellaiyan and the Pradani Ramalingam Pillai founded and endowed temples and *chattirams* (pilgrims' rest houses). The Periya Tambis and other Maraikkayar leaders sponsored the composition of Islamic texts and the building of mosques and Koran schools.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in addition to the Maraikkayars, the Setupatis and others at the court were engaged in trade. On several occasions, for instance, Vairavanatha came into conflict with the Dutch about the merchandise of his own ships.<sup>43</sup> Commercial activities and religious gifting obviously served as ways to gain and legitimate power to people of both royal and non-royal descent.

Apart from courtiers and merchants, bandits or warrior chiefs were a significant political factor in Ramnad and some of its neighbouring kingdoms. Their roles in Sivaganga's breaking away from Ramnad and Damodaram Pillai's conquest of Ramanathapuram are just two examples of their influence. During almost every period of political instability, warriors sprung into action and brought the violent palai of the Sangam poetry to life. With reference to the machinations at the court following the death of Sella Tevar in 1763, the Dutch wrote that "in the meantime, the subjects of the Theuver Lord were on the move to plunder and rob, as is common on such occasions." Important trade centres such as Pativenalur were regularly devastated and even the VOC factory at Kilakkarai was attacked by warriors once or twice.<sup>44</sup> Their destabilising activi-

*Svarajya* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1986), 21-34; Dirk A.H. Kolff, "The End of an *Ancien Régime*: Colonial War in India, 1798-1818," in *Imperialism and War. Essays on Colonial Wars in Asia and Africa*, ed. J.A. de Moor and H.L. Wesseling (Leiden: E.J. Brill, Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1989), *passim*, especially 24-7, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Raja Ram Rao, *Ramnad Manual*, 81-8, 91-119; Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 81-4; Shulman and Subrahmanyam, "Prince of Poets and Ports," 524-5.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. ARA, VOC 2400, ff. 411-v; VOC 2403, f. 1971v; VOC 2599, ff. 2201v-3; VOC 2621, f. 2212: correspondence between Tuticorin, Colombo, and Batavia, 1737, 1743, 1744.

<sup>44</sup> For Ramnad's "robbers", see e.g. ARA, VOC 2158, ff. 945v-55; VOC 2224, f. 1617v; VOC 2431, ff. 1939-v; VOC 3082, f. 1454; VOC 3322, f. 648: documents from 1729, 1732, 1738, 1763, 1771.

ties were probably not related just to sheer greed and a taste for bloodthirstiness but prompted by political motives. It is very likely that most of the warriors who were perceived as “robbers” actually functioned as local chiefs, taking advantage of unstable periods to plunder, subdue rivals, support factions at the court, and increase their own power—strategies employed by the Setupatis themselves too.

The original abode of the first Setupati and the bandits he subdued, the sheltering forests, remained important. In times of military threats, Ramnad’s thick jungles provided excellent bases from where the Setupati’s troops conducted their defence and launched their guerrilla-like attacks on the usually cumbersome invading armies. These “natural fortresses,” as the Dutch called the forests, often played a decisive role in the progress of battles, for instance during the invasion by Arcot in 1738. The jungle also functioned as an area of refuge when an enemy conquered the towns and farmland. In 1741, the Sivaganga court fled to its dense forests during the campaigns of the Marathas in the region making it impossible to be tracked down by them. In 1758, mere rumours that Thanjavur planned an imminent attack on Ramnad were enough to make most people in the kingdom pack their belongings and hide themselves in the jungle.<sup>45</sup>

The role of nature in Ramnad’s warfare was well understood by the Dutch. The VOC records regularly refer to the Setupati as “lord of the forest” (*bosheer*), “king of the woods” (*woudkoning*), “prince of the forest” (*bosprins*), “monarch of the thorns” (*doornvorst*), and the like, the last term denoting the kingdom’s frequent use of thorn-bushes for its defence. It is likely that what is often referred to as Ramnad’s thick forests consisted largely of dense thorn-bushes.<sup>46</sup> The Setupati’s soldiers were sometimes called “thorn-guards” (*doornwachters*) by the Dutch.<sup>47</sup> However, despite their awareness of Ramnad’s guerrilla-like strategies, when the Dutch attempted to occupy Ramesvaram Island in 1746 after decades of mounting tension between Ramnad and the VOC, they were not able to defeat the Setupati’s troops completely. In addition to an out-break of malaria and the anger aroused among South Indian Hindu rulers by the presence of Dutch beef-eating infidels on the sacred island, Ramnad’s military

<sup>45</sup> For forests as a place of defence and refuge, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2431, ff. 1932-4v; VOC 2457, ff. 1017v, 1023; VOC 2459, ff. 1566v-7v, 1594, 1601-v, 1605v-6; VOC 2523, f. 1397; VOC 2925, f. 842: documents from 1738-9, 1741, 1758.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Spate, *India and Pakistan*, 733.

<sup>47</sup> For these references, see e.g. ARA, VOC 2186, ff. 1224, 1307v; VOC 2245, f. 328; VOC 2291, ff. 502-5; VOC 2559, f. 1495v; VOC 2599, f. 2192; VOC 2621, ff. 2219, 2228; VOC 2733, f. 18v; VOC 2925, ff. 845v-50: documents from 1731, 1733, 1742-4, 1749, 1758.

tactics caused the VOC expedition to be a miserable failure. The Dutch had no answer to their opponents' unexpected, often nocturnal, swift raids—which could be carried out by as few as ten men—on the VOC encampment from the enormous surrounding thorn-bushes.<sup>48</sup> The Company was left no choice but to rely on Indian diplomacy again.

#### FRIENDSHIP AS LONG AS THE SUN AND MOON SHINE

It was indeed Indian (rather than European) diplomacy that dominated Dutch-Ramnad relations. In accordance with ancient South Indian custom,<sup>49</sup> in their treaties and correspondence the kingdom and the Company often expressed the will to maintain their friendship for as long as the sun and moon would shine and illuminate heaven and earth. In reality, however, the sky was often overcast. Hardly a year would pass without discord of some sort because of conflicting commercial and political interests. Trade was one of Ramnad's most important economic activities, in which many of the kingdom's powerful people were involved. With all their monopolistic claims and mercantile restrictions the Dutch were naturally seen as competitors. On the other hand, Ramnad greatly benefited from the tolls levied from the VOC at Kilakkrai and the Pamban Channel, and saw the Company as a useful ally, which was obliged to assist the Setupati in the event of an attack. The same ambiguity was felt by the Dutch, who deeply resented the kingdom's ongoing breaches of contract, but considered the Pamban Channel absolutely essential to their trade operations and therefore they had to remain on good terms with the court in order to keep the passage open to their vessels.<sup>50</sup>

Because of this two-fold nature of the Dutch-Ramnad contacts—a combination of interdependence and competition—both parties constantly tried to gain as much as possible from the relationship (and even strain it a little if need be) without infuriating the other too much and spoiling the relationship beyond the point of reconciliation. The Dutch grew quite familiar with this balance between intimidation and negotiation. In his memoirs, Governor Overbeek of Ceylon wrote to his successor Stein van Gollonesse:

<sup>48</sup> ARA, VOC 2666, ff. 2053-406: papers concerning the VOC expedition against Ramnad, 1746.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. J. Duncan M. Derrett, *The Hoysalas. A Medieval Indian Royal Family* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1957), 210-1; Stein, *Peasant State and Society*, 223; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, 433; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce. Southern India, 1500-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 87.

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. ARA, VOC 2403, ff. 1957-v: secret letter from Colombo to Tuticorin, 1737.

[I] do not think that those Marruassen [Maravas], who have displayed more of such bullies [*bullebacken*], will stretch it any further, but after their custom and having made much shouting, are about to settle the matters themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Conflicts that were originally related to trade might also be expressed by way of diplomacy and protocol, which aspects would then assume a life of their own and intensify the disagreements. For instance, when the Setupati Kattaya Tevar visited Kilakkai during his conflict with the Dutch about the redemption of his debt, the VOC *Resident*, Wouter Trek, presented the Setupati with a gift, albeit not personally. Although this had been perfectly acceptable to previous Setupatis, Kattaya's reaction was one of utter indignation: he was furious about this lack of respect. Designating the impersonal homage as an offence, however, doubtless also served as a good occasion for Kattaya to express his irritation with the Dutch because of their insistence on a quick and total payment of the debt. Therefore, the Setupati rejected the VOC's gift and had it dramatically thrown down in front of the Company's factory, but what was probably meant as a symbolic deed sparked off much more discord. The Dutch were now infuriated as well, and the subsequent polemic resulted in Ramnad's closing off the Pamban Channel and courting other European trading companies—both actions which actually embodied the VOC's worst fears and therefore the very last reactions it had intended to cause.<sup>52</sup>

Ramnad's relationship with the Dutch had much in common with the kingdom's internal relations and its contacts with other kingdoms. Political strategies such as dividing the opposition, forging alliances, and involving one's enemy's enemies were common tactics at the court and also came into play in dealing with the VOC. Whenever Ramnad thought that the Dutch had become too unreasonable, it threatened to (or really did) contact the British or French and establish regular relations with them.<sup>53</sup> In other instances, the court actually sought the Company's support against its own enemies. In 1731 Kattaya Tevar tried to draw the VOC into his conflicts with Sivaganga and Thanjavur, while at the same time Regent Labbai Nayinar wanted to become a protégé of the Company (after years of adopting a strong anti-Dutch stance), hoping to secure his position should Kattaya be overthrown. The VOC's assistance was also requested

<sup>51</sup> ARA, Hoge Regering Batavia 567, ff. 105-6: final report (*memorie van overgave*), 1743.

<sup>52</sup> ARA, VOC 2291, ff. 501-15, 519-27: correspondence between Tuticorin and Colombo, 1733.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. ARA, VOC 2186, ff. 1212, 1224v; VOC 2291, ff. 505-6, 514-5, 532; VOC 2457, ff. 1030v-1; VOC 2459, ff. 1636-7; VOC 2599, f. 2090; VOC 2666, ff. 2221, 2225-v: documents from 1731, 1733, 1739, 1743, 1746.

by the court-nobles to occupy parts of Madurai in 1737,<sup>54</sup> and by Mappillai Tevar when he saw his rule being threatened by Damodaram Pillai's military advances. In her struggle against Dalavay Vairavanatha, the mother of Sivakumara Setupati even endeavoured to get the Dutch on her side by calling VOC *Resident* Trek her eldest son, thereby incorporating him into the Setupati dynasty. Later, this kinship was apparently extended to Trek's superiors when, in 1739, Governor Van Imhoff "as Sivakumara's eldest brother" was asked to attend the Setupati's wedding. (Somewhat childishly, Van Imhoff wrote back that the Setupati should pay more respect to his Dutch brothers and henceforth comply with the VOC's demands.)<sup>55</sup> After the Company had occupied Ramesvaram Island in 1746, the Setupati (or rather his nobles) called the Dutch "beloved sons of the Teuver court" in an attempt to soften them and be more lenient towards Ramnad.<sup>56</sup> These fictitious family relationships bear a great resemblance to the name-gifting and symbolic adoption practised between the Nayakas of Madurai, the Setupatis, Maraikkayar leaders, and other nobles.

The protocol Ramnad expected the Dutch to observe was also based largely on customs observed within and between South Indian courts. For instance, occasions that traditionally required the donation of gifts in South India included: the recognition of military leaders, the prelude to and the conclusion of negotiations, and the encouragement to allies to take action.<sup>57</sup> During the VOC embassies to Ramanathapuram, gifts were presented in similar situations: the recognition of powerful people at the court, the welcoming and departure audiences, and the encouragement to nobles to grant audiences with the Setupati.<sup>58</sup> Another illustration of Ramnad's perception of the Company concerns the great value attached by Indian rulers to (the looting of) art objects like images, regalia, and emblems as indicators of political power and incorporation.<sup>59</sup> In this context the Madurai Nayakas' donation of their palanquin to the Setupatis in the 1650s and the removal of the Nayaka statues from Madurai by Ramnad in 1739 should be recalled. The Dutch were supposed to understand the political significance of such acts. In 1725 when Bhavani Sankara defeated some hostile chiefs who appeared to be carrying the Setupati regalia—including the royal elephant, the golden palanquin, the *periyaperikai* (throne), the *kutai*

<sup>54</sup> ARA, VOC 2403, ff. 1969-v: letter from Colombo to Tuticorin, 1737.

<sup>55</sup> ARA, VOC 2457, ff. 874-6v: proceedings (*resolutie*) of the Council of Colombo, containing correspondence between Setupati Sivakumara and Governor Van Imhoff, 1739.

<sup>56</sup> ARA, VOC 2666, ff. 2238-42v: letter from Sivakumara to Opperhoofd Domburg of the Fishery Coast, 1746.

<sup>57</sup> See Price, *Kingship and Political Practice*, 19-25.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, 310-4.

<sup>59</sup> See Davis, "Indian Art Objects as Loot," *passim*.

(umbrella), and the *melsalli* (drum)<sup>60</sup>—during his conquest of Ramnad, he deemed it necessary to inform the Dutch about this event and these objects in detail (as well as his performance in early October of the ceremony of “water-bathing,” most probably referring to Navaratri).<sup>61</sup> Apparently, Bhavani believed that his possession of the regalia (and his celebration of the ceremony) increased his legitimacy in the eyes of the powerful VOC, as it would have done to indigenous parties.<sup>62</sup> Ramnad’s exceptional indignation and fierce, unremitting resistance during the Company’s occupation of Ramesvaram Island in 1746 should also be viewed in this perspective. In a sense, by their (partial) capture of the island the Dutch had taken over the protection of the deity at the Ramanathasvami Temple. The mandate to provide this protection, however, served as the very legitimisation of the Setupatis. Therefore, in Ramnad the occupation was not only felt as a failure to execute religious duties, but as a political defeat and disgrace too. Probably without realising it, the VOC could not have humiliated the Ramnad court more than by conquering the Setu. Objects such as images and regalia appeared to be as exalted to the court as contracts were to the Company. Incidentally, the approval by the Setupati’s mother of the plundering by the Nattars or peasants of Ramnad—cited at the beginning of this article—can be regarded as another example of the political value of looting. Her incitement may well have been an attempt to present herself as the leader of those peasants, sanctioning their plundering and increasing her own power in the kingdom and at the court.

Examining the policy that Ramnad pursued with respect to the Dutch, it is obvious that it considered the VOC just one of the many rival parties operating in the kingdom.<sup>63</sup> Despite its non-Indian background, the Company was treated like any powerful indigenous person or community and was easily absorbed into the fluid, open society of the kingdom. The Dutch presence in Ramnad did not cause any fundamental reaction in the kingdom. As we will see, the only one who really reacted to the VOC’s presence in the kingdom was a Dutchman himself. Ramnad’s perception of the VOC should not seem too surprising because in the eyes of the kingdom’s inhabitants, the Company had obviously appeared

<sup>60</sup> I would like to thank A. Govindankutty Menon of Leiden University for helping to make sense of the eighteenth-century Dutch renderings of these Tamil words.

<sup>61</sup> ARA, VOC 2046, ff. 762-v: letter from Bhavani Sankara to Governor Hertenberg at Colombo, 1725. For a description of Navaratri and its “water-bathing,” see Breckenridge, “From Protector to Litigant,” 78–88, especially 83.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Shulman, *The King and the Clown*, 368.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Kolff, “The End of an Ancien Régime,” 25.

in South India and Ceylon to make a stake for political influence and conduct trade, in other words: to become contenders in the local struggle for power. The Dutch had conquered large parts of the Ceylonese coast, virtually ruled the region's waters, occasionally managed to achieve a degree of domination at South Indian courts, and had established numerous coastal trading stations, some of which were impregnable fortresses. The objectives of the VOC were understandable enough to Ramnad; after all, the kingdom itself also strove to achieve mercantile and political power. Both military strength and flourishing trade were vital to its existence. Therefore, Ramnad saw the Company as a competitor, which pursued familiar and in itself admirable aims, and which compared well with any other opponent. Like all other parties, the VOC was expected to join in the regional power struggle and therefore to understand the fluid local workings of the political culture with its shifting alliances, slumbering conflicts, divided loyalties and shared domination.

It is very likely that in the perception of the inhabitants of Ramnad, the Dutch were some tribe of bandits, as the VOC had much in common with the region's indigenous robbers and warrior chiefs. Like them, the Dutch possessed great military skills and had their power base in a peripheral, mobile area. Therefore, their position was ambivalent: they threatened the political centre of the king, but they could also be employed by the ruler because of these very capacities. Like many other bandits in a relationship with kings, the Dutch were of great interest to the Setupati because of their ability to provide him with protection against his enemies, but once they had been admitted to his realm they appropriated some of his power. As already stated, the sea, the abode of the VOC, bears a great metaphorical resemblance to the forests and dry plains. All these regions were imbued with a marginal, desolate, and hazardous character, but at the same time generated wealth and opportunities to increase and secure the power of a ruler or of one bent on achieving might. Like the jungle, the sea served as an area which was a source of foreign products, recruitment, refuge, and passage—all of which the Dutch provided. To give one more example: it is not surprising that during the turmoil in Ramnad around 1730, it was suggested to the VOC that it build a fort at the port of Kilakkrai. Like the abode of bandits, the littoral domiciles of the Dutch could be retreats, somewhat detached from settled political centres. The coast served as a frontier, where the interaction took place between the sedentary life of the king and his subjects and the mobile, venturesome world of the trading company.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, 336-9; Stein, *Peasant State and Society*, 299; Heesterman, "The 'Hindu Frontier,'" 13-4.

The Dutch never really crossed this frontier. Apart from the question of whether they would have agreed with being branded a gang of robbers, they seem to have been largely unaware of the way Ramnad perceived them.<sup>65</sup> They understood the kingdom's political culture quite well and occasionally conformed to it, but at the same time, they were convinced that the VOC occupied an exceptional position in Ramnad. Under all circumstances, the Company adhered strictly to the treaties concluded with the Setupatis and expected everyone in Ramnad to do the same. Ramnad's countless (often deliberate) breaches of contract and protocol never failed to shock the Dutch throughout their presence in the kingdom and figure prominently in many angry letters exchanged between VOC settlements and with the Ramnad court—the same anger that erupted when the “corrupt” practices of *Resident* Reynier Helmond at Kilakkarakai were discovered. Helmond, however, had lived almost alone in a South Indian environment for a long time. He must have grown very accustomed to Ramnad's fluid society and realised that adapting to the regional political culture would yield more (for himself) than would clinging to the VOC's stubbornness and political naïveté. Without doubt, to the inhabitants of Ramnad his behaviour was perfectly understandable. The *Resident* may officially have been serving the VOC but then in South India there was always the risk that servants would be disloyal to their master in order to enhance their own position. Helmond pragmatically used the Company's capital to forge alliances with two of Ramnad's most important power bases: the court and the mercantile community. The discovery of a large quantity of jewellery and coins in a box owned by Helmond's local concubine, named Cecilia, after his death,<sup>66</sup> confirms that the *Resident* was running his trading station at Kilakkarakai like a South Indian chief, seizing every opportunity to climb the ladder from robber to ruler.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

ARA	Algemeen Rijksarchief (National Archives), The Hague
DR	Dutch Records
TNA	Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai (Madras)
VOC	(archives of the) Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company)

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Kolff, “The End of an *Ancien Régime*,” 29.

<sup>66</sup> ARA, VOC 2246, ff. 192-4.

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